

Vol. 8, No. 3

October, 1921

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THE PRINT-COLLECTOR'S QUARTERLY

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J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.
10-13 BEDFORD STREET, LONDON W.C.2

AMERICAN AGENT: E. WEYHE, 710 LEXINGTON AVENUE, NEW YORK

Mr. PERCY SMITH'S "DANCE OF DEATH"

By CAMPBELL DODGSON

N the sixteenth century, and again in the nineteenth, many Swiss and German artists found inspiration for pen or graver in the horrors of war and pestilence. Whether in connected series, such as the famous *Simulachres et historiées faces de la Mort* of Holbein or the *Todtentanz* of Rethel, or in single woodcuts or drawings which we owe to Dürer and Burgkmair, Baldung and Urs Graf, Death dances his grisly measure through a large part of Teutonic art. France also has her painters, sculptors and engravers of the *Danse macabre*, from the middle ages to Legros's *Triomphe de la Mort* and Besnard's *Elle*, an imaginative masterpiece jealously withheld from publication by the present owner of the etched plates.

In England the traditional theme has been handled more rarely ; most powerfully, in modern times, by Strang, in his *Doings of Death*, a series of woodcuts published in 1902, without reference to war. The Great War produced its harvest of etchings and lithographs of trenches, craters, barbed wire, shattered houses and blasted trees ; but most of them were literal representations of things seen. Mr. Percy Smith, with imagination rare among English etchers, and akin to that of the draughtsmen of the northern Renaissance, combines with his sympathetic treatment of the soldier marching

or fallen, crippled, maimed and agonised, the vision of an awful Presence, relentless, patient, callous, exultant ; " awed," in a single etching that can never be forgotten, by one culminating horror.

" The Dance of Death, 1914-1918 " is not a pretty set of etchings, but it is one of the most serious and memorable works of art inspired by the War. The series, of which the British Museum owes a copy to the generosity of a donor, consists of seven etchings in a portfolio lettered, as it is published, by the artist himself. *Death Forbids* is the title of the first etching. Pinned down under a fallen tree, in the midst of a tangle of barbed wire, a soldier, still alive but powerless to move, sees in the distance a party of stretcher bearers carrying off a more fortunate comrade from the battlefield. He calls and gesticulates in vain ; Death touches his agitated hand with a firm gesture of restraint. *Death Marches*, a tall gaunt figure on tiptoe, keeping pace with the serried ranks of infantry, four abreast, in their " tin hats," going up to the front. *Death Awed* is the next. Our illustration shows what makes him halt on his way along the duck-board through some water-logged desert of France or Flanders. The composition is simple and masterly ; nothing could be more tragic, more eloquent of the horror of utter loneliness that war has left behind it. In *Death Refuses* we look out towards the light from a dark trench in which two men are lying, in torment, wearing gas masks. Death turns his back on them, walking away ; refusing, it seems, the boon for which one of the men, with raised right hand, implores him. *Death Waits*, in the next, sitting all alone, his chin resting on his bony fingers, in a region of shattered posts and barbed wire ; the air is darkened with smoke ; it is a

lone and sinister landscape, fraught with impending doom. *Death Ponders*, tall, erect, in cowl and shroud gathered closely round his bones, by the side of a fallen man, whose hands clutch the soil of a bank before him. His life depends on the outcome of that deliberate reflection. *Death Intoxicated*, abandons, at last, all his poses of meditation or expectancy, and dances on the battlefield with wild leaps and bounds of exultation, legs and arms flung out, fingers bent, the hollow sockets of his eyes and his grinning mouth combining to express a devilish merriment. Two soldiers, one of them holding a bayonet, intervene in the immediate foreground between us and Death, and the landscape beyond is full of little figures, lightly etched, engaged in active fighting or tending the wounded.

The series, long enough and not too long, is the result, evidently, of concentrated thought by one who has witnessed and shared in the horrors of war, and has been moved by them to this powerful and serious effort of interpretation. The last thing anyone could wish for him would be a repetition of any similar experience. Such horrors are past, for a time if not for ever. But they are a lawful subject for art, and the earnestness and tragic dignity with which Mr. Percy Smith has handled so grim a theme lift his set of etchings altogether out of the region of the commonplace. It is to be hoped that in future he will be more happily, but none the less genuinely, inspired by other experiences, other visions than casualties of war and phantom gestures of Death.